

**BEFORE THE
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20554**

In the Matter of:

MM Docket No. 04-233

Broadcast Localism:

COMMENTS OF THE MONTANA BROADCASTERS ASSOCIATION

"At that moment those two children were KCGM's most important listeners."

The aforementioned quote is from a story published last year in the Montana Journalism Review. (<http://www.umt.edu/journalism/mjr/MJR2007/pages/KCGM/kcgm1.htm>) It speaks more to localism than any FCC mandate or any community advisory board could ever do. The two children in question were stranded in a car when their father was forced to leave to seek help during a blizzard in far northeast Montana. He left them with the radio on and told them not to touch it; he would "contact" them as soon as he found help. After trudging through the snow the father finally reached a house with a phone and his first call was to KCGM. He explained the situation to the operator on duty and asked that they convey his message over the air to his kids that "Dad was all right and help was on the way." The station did that, but also ceased its regular programming and replaced it with children's stories and songs and comforting messages until the father called them back to report that those two kids were safe.

That is what localism is all about and what Montana broadcasters do every day. It may not be quite that dramatic, but in every community we have examples of similar services.

Localism is the way all twelve Missoula commercial radio stations put aside all competitive differences and banded together to raise the funds needed to prevent the only local homeless shelter and soup kitchen in operation from closing its doors forever; it is about the owners of a Havre station venturing out weekly to tutor children on the Rocky Boys Indian Reservation; it is about how the local community of Wolf Point banded together when the owner of its radio stations died to take over their operation because the stations were so important to the community.

We count among our broadcasters city council persons and state legislators, former Governors, little league coaches and PTA parents, the founder of a local Big Brothers and Sisters chapter, church Deacons and Humane Society trustees. Unfortunately, and this is somewhat ironic, broadcasters tend to be pretty modest people. When I talk to them about their community service work and how important it is that they share these stories with me, and you, more often than not they merely shrug and say, "That's just what we do."

What they do includes the scholarship program of a Billings television station. Each spring they award four college scholarships to local students. Perhaps even more important are the “scholarships” that they award a local teacher each week. The teachers can use the funds to pay for projects and programs that school funding does not cover. Among the recent projects were an all-school musical; science experiments on weightlessness and Newton’s Law; a “world of work” project where the students created their own business which is now making money and funding even more projects. Or how about a program called “A Child is Waiting” where the station works with social services to profile and place orphans and court wards who have become lost in the system. We’re talking about the cute little newborn adoptees, these are the “tough cases” according to social services—the kids with broken families, drug problems and the like. With a better than 50% placement success this has become a model program for other communities.

Localism is a Helena radio group that not only carries local news and public affairs programs on all six of its stations, but also high school football and basketball (both boys and girls), college football and basketball (men’s and women’s), legion baseball and minor league baseball. They also sponsor and promote a local agricultural program for the developmentally disabled. Once again, this has become a program that has been a model for other communities around the state and nation and, recently, in their sister city in Kyrgystan. Four years ago those same stations started the Helena Education Foundation as a way to raise funds for local schools to pay for programs threatened by budget cuts. Is that not a local service? Does it not serve the local community? One does not need a “community advisory board with all of its attendant paperwork to know what is needed in one’s local community. That is why they stage and carry debates for state-wide and local races. Our managers their employees serve on Chambers of Commerce, local hospital advisory boards, in their churches and on virtually every service group in every city and town.

Last week the station learned of a local resident suffering from cancer who has three small children. Sadly, his insurance would not cover out-patient treatments which included his chemotherapy. In one weekend the station raised over \$20,000 to help defray the cost of those treatments. Don’t want to hear about blood drives and fund raisers? Tell that to the family of Chuck Clingan that can now put food on the table while still paying medical bills in Helena, Montana. That is localism.

Need more examples? How about JoAnn and John Schuyler of Dillon. Together they own and operate an AM-FM combo in this small agricultural community. The local programming on KDBM and KBEV includes, along with local news, weather and sports, a weekly High School Sports Round-Up; a weekly School Activities program which covers all of the other local activities including music, drama, and forensics; a weekly More than the Score program featuring club sports and activities that might otherwise fall through the cracks; a weekly 4H – FFA program; a weekly college round-up; a weekly community roundtable where local officials and the public are invited in to discuss local community issues. The stations also cover local High School football, boys and girls basketball, volleyball and Legion baseball. One recent weekend they had crews in Belgrade, Butte and Hamilton (an

area the geographic size of most eastern states) covering three different classes of state tournaments. High School sports may not seem important to those living in major markets but, trust me, you could take every politician and community “official” off of every program in a rural area and never hear a peep. Take the high school sports off and you would have an uprising. Small Montana communities identify themselves by their local schools.

When JoAnn learned that 29% of the kids in one of the local schools came from homes with incomes below the federal poverty level she began both a school supplies and coats drive. Through this effort every child (and many adults) in the community are guaranteed a winter coat if they need one. They recently added, gloves, scarves, hats and boots to the program. And how did JoAnn come to learn this? She and John both tutor elementary students in math and English. These people are a community advisory board unto themselves. They certainly don’t need the federal government telling them what to do in Dillon.

JoAnn and John personally brought in a consultant to conduct a feasibility study for a YMCA building in Dillon. Then, working with the consultant and a group of local individuals, spearheaded the public awareness campaign and fundraising to construct such a facility. It opened last year. John and JoAnn do so much in their community that they were recently honored as the inaugural “Citizen’s of the Year” in Dillon.

Please remember that the regulations, and their attendant costs, that you place upon New York and LA are also placed on Scoby and Wolf Point, Montana. Small and medium market stations that will be required to meet that paperwork, web and other obligations will, by necessity, have to give up something in return; staff and local programming are the most likely options. The power company and the phone company aren’t likely to reduce their bills to cover costs mandated by more FCC rules and regulations.

Those regulations will most certainly lead to increased costs and less service. Requiring manned operation for overnight and fringe times will simply mean that stations will, as they did in the past; sign off at 11:00 PM or midnight and back on in the morning. The service that those overnight programs provide is virtually a gift. Very few small market stations make any money in those hours and if they do it certainly is not enough to justify hiring a person to baby-sit the board. And then what becomes of that EAS or Amber Alert or Stockman’s advisory that comes down at 2 AM? It will go nowhere because the station will be off-air. The same can be said of manning separate “city of license” studios. Rather than having more voices and program choices you will see fewer. Our small communities where the FCC has opened up license opportunities did not have a strong enough local economy to support stand-alone stations in the past and they certainly do not now. I encourage

you to refresh your collective memories about the rationale for the 1996 re-write which allowed these innovative approaches to broadcasting. Not only had technology advanced to the point where they were feasible, but even in our larger markets stations were going dark at an alarming rate. The 1996 act allowed many of those stations, and their differing program voices, to remain a viable option in the community.

You must also consider that the communications landscape has changed dramatically, even since the 1996 re-write. Internet and satellite radio have joined the picture along with LPFM and a tremendous number of new traditional licenses. In my own community there were 8 commercial broadcasters and one non-commercial educational station. Today there are 19 commercial broadcasters and two non-commercial educational stations with another three licenses having been just acquired. If these stations were not allowed to operate as clusters with the attendant savings in studio, engineering, traffic and sales personnel I dare say that would soon see a return to 8 or perhaps 10 stations. It is only because of the highly successful (economically) conservative talk station that the same operator can afford to carry the highly unsuccessful (again, economically) progressive / liberal talk station; the contemporary station subsidizes the alternative rock station; and the country station subsidizes the news /talk station.

Finally, as the former manager of the aforementioned non-commercial NPR affiliate who was responsible for developing and maintaining the community advisory board as well as conducting the required ascertainment studies I can assure you that we virtually never learned anything from those meetings that we did not already know. The quarterly meetings were little more than an excuse for the board members to get together to drink coffee, eat cookies and share local gossip. Every member of our staff knew well enough to bring any and all news and public affairs concerns and ideas to our regular staff meetings where they were addressed. Any operator who fails to meet the needs of his or her community will receive their just awards from that community. The federal government does not need to punish them (and everyone else in what the fishing trade refers to as by-catch). The local community will do a fine job by not supporting them.